

Disturbing angels in the wilderness

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 4 December 2022

A Reflection by Rev Penny Jones

Advent 2C

Contemporary Reading: 'The World I Live In' by Mary Oliver; Matthew 3: 1-12

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/> The version below is not a transcript, but the script from which the reflector spoke, so there may be some changes of wording.

John the Baptist is an angel. This is explicit in the biblical text, where Mark writes of them, quoting Isaiah, "*behold I send my messenger ahead of you*" – and the word used for messenger (as everywhere in the Greek text) is *angelos* - angel! John the Baptist probably does not fit the picture we have of an angel – no wings, no obvious glowing light, no message of peace. But he's an angel. He's pretty unmissable – wild, eccentric to say the least, and certainly not welcome at the average family tea table. As Jo has written in her brief Biblical commentaries in Insights for this season

"If he was a toddler someone might suggest his emotions were dysregulated by his diet and he needed to calm down and get a good night's sleep! Yet, his prophetic voice is one we cannot ignore. He reminds us that there is always a place for righteous anger and that sometimes the new and better requires actions of clearing and letting go that can be painful and disturbing to some. His voice acts as corrective to tendencies in some Christian circles to associate the gospel with niceness or respectability. John was not respectable. But his message was essential." His was the message of a disturbing angel calling us to change.

Today, the second Sunday of Advent, is traditionally devoted to those other disturbing angels - the prophets – and in particular to the voices of Malachi, second Isaiah and of John the Baptist as recorded by the gospel writers. Those voices, spanning the centuries, are angelic voices, calling to us in wilderness places and inviting us to expect change, whether at the personal level, or at the macro level where today we hear particularly the voices of those crying out for climate justice.

All of us know that we are to expect Christ – to be ready to hear and respond to the voice that calls to us and draws us home. But we sometimes tune out – especially if that home coming demands personal or communal change. So, what can help us?

The gospel writers tell us that the voice of God is most easily heard in the wilderness. For it is in the wilderness that the prophets tell us to prepare for the Messiah. "*The voice of one crying out in the wilderness. Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.*"

Second Isaiah was bringing good news to a people in exile. He imagines a smooth level road in the desert on which the exiles can return home. He takes them back to their history – a history in which a time of rebellion against God was punished by wandering forty years in the desert, followed by entry into the promised land.

In Isaiah's schema the exiles have done their time, their '*penalty is paid*' and therefore they can expect once again to be led by God out of the wilderness and back to the promised land. And so, he urges them, while they are still undergoing the experience of exile, of wilderness, to prepare a way for God.

The Jews in Jesus's time also felt themselves to be in a spiritual wilderness. They were living as an oppressed people under the Romans. They had not received the voice of God since the last of the prophets several centuries earlier and they were waiting for the heavens to open once more. There were teachers among them who urged them to expect that the Messiah would return in the wilderness – though quite which bit of the wilderness was open to dispute! So, it is no surprise that the gospel writers locate John the Baptist in the wilderness.

Indeed, it was expected that the herald, the angel, of the Messiah would be Elijah, so again it is no surprise that John the Baptist is described as wearing clothing reminiscent of Elijah, who in 2 Kings: 1 is declared to be '*a hairy man, with a leather belt around his waist.*'

But a comma can make a big difference – except that ancient texts have no punctuation. The gospel quotes Isaiah as saying, "*a voice crying out in the wilderness*" – and attributes that voice to John. In fact, in the Hebrew Isaiah says: "*a voice crying out, "In the wilderness prepare a way*". So, does it matter? Well only in so far as it is important that we remember that we are to prepare in the wilderness. And that is very encouraging. Indeed, to use Isaiah's word, it is very comforting. For it tells us that we do not have to wait until everything is perfect in our world or lives to prepare for God's coming. Rather we are to begin right here and now, in the midst of whatever mess and vulnerability confronts us.

This has to be an angelic message for our times too. For we too are experiencing a wilderness of sorts. Old institutions of church and state, both here in Australia and across the world seem to be in a state of flux if not collapse.

There are '*wars and rumours of wars*'. We have undergone pestilence and so-called 'natural' disasters in many places. The ropes tethering us to certain understandings of ourselves and our place in the world seem rather frayed. But angels like John the Baptist are telling us not to run away from any of that. Expecting Christ does not need to wait for the world to be clean and tidy and respectable.

We do not have to have our lives in order for Christ to come. Last time we know of, Christ came to a smelly stable, with rather dodgy soon to be refugee parents, in an occupied country. And what John and the angels like him say is 'Wilderness is fine! That's the very place to prepare yourself – in fact it's the only place, because that is where we all are, and the first step of preparation is truthfulness about the mess in which we all live our lives.

For each of us is in our own kind of exile, separated from our truest selves – that is just what it is to be human. Our lives sometimes seem like high tension wires, strung between disturbance and obligation. The voice of God through angels like John the Baptist, calls out in this wilderness of our own noise and haste, where we are held captive by our tasks and obligations, our fears and desires.

The voice of the prophets calls us home from this exile, home to our own lives, home to our true selves, to our own Belovedness.

The road home, the clearing of the way to re-enter our own lives, leads often through silence and darkness; through that '*cloud of unknowing*' of which the mystics speak; through our not knowing what to say or do. It leads us through mystery, in which we dwell with that angelic voice, without words for it or ways to manage it. Finding that road often means paying attention to the voices and indeed the actions of the less 'obvious' angels. The angels, who like John the Baptist, can take us by surprise and sometimes cause us disquiet and disturbance.

The way home is not an arduous journey. In fact, the promise of Advent is that One is coming who will lead us, carry us, feed us, bring us back. Yet we can also expect that One to be little, weak, vulnerable as a tiny child – such a One is not to be found in places of comfort and wealth but among the poorest of the poor.

They are to be found not in the places of power and certainty, but in the tender and difficult spots where the words of hope are tentative – 'maybe', 'what if'. But as Mary Oliver writes in our poem today, 'and anyway, what's wrong with Maybe?'

So, in these Advent days, listen for the voice of the One who calls you home from exile. Prepare a way in your wildernesses – a way perhaps of silence and stillness amid all the difficult things you carry; a way of not knowing but of waiting.

Wait for the voice of the One who speaks to your soul, whether they speak in the disturbing voices of the prophets calling you to change - or in the gentle whispers of the Advocate, who murmurs in the darkness, "Comfort, O comfort my people".

And above all leave space for imagination, for indeed, '*only if there are angels in your head will you ever, possibly, see one*'.

Amen